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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [NATO](#) [NL](#) [AF](#)  
SUBJECT: NETHERLANDS/ISAF: PRESSING THE DUTCH ON AFGHANISTAN

Classified By: Charge D'Affaires Chat Blakeman,  
reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Post pressed GONL officials and parliamentarians from all major parties on Dutch participation in ISAF III over the last few days. Most indicated chances for deployment were grim, but were unwilling to rule out a positive decision completely. Some senior GONL officials are advising PM Balkenende to force a Cabinet decision when it next meets January 13 to cut short an embarrassing political debate that is focusing increasingly on his leadership rather than the proposed mission. During a meeting to strategize on outreach, allied diplomats here agreed that a positive decision was still possible, but not probable. End summary.

PM's Office Frustrated But Hopeful  
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¶2. (C) Charge told National Security Advisor Rob Swartbol January 5 that Washington was greatly disappointed and frustrated by the Cabinet's inability to put forth an official decision on ISAF III. Swartbol said he also was frustrated, but said forcing a Cabinet decision without D-66 support at that time would have caused the government to fall. Instead, Balkenende opted for more time to persuade D-66 to support the mission.

¶3. (C) Charge pressed Swartbol on the GONL's strategy to get to a "yes." Swartbol said he and senior MFA and MOD officials are advising Balkenende to push up the decision timeline, and force a Cabinet decision during its next meeting on January 13. If Balkenende can persuade the two D-66 ministers to approve the mission, even with reservations, then there would be no need for the January 24 parliamentary procedural discussion. Swartbol said Balkenende was not willing to risk the collapse of his government over this mission -- if D-66 continued to hold out, then Dutch participation in Stage III was effectively dead.

¶4. (C) Swartbol said the GONL was looking for "reliable, independent" sources like Human Rights Watch or UNHCR to advocate Dutch participation and demonstrate European commitment to ISAF. (Note: We have asked EUR/PA to do the same. End note.) He said that Kamp will wage a public relations campaign next week to shift public perception in favor of the mission. Swartbol noted that a "firm U.S. voice" in public would most likely work against efforts to persuade the opposition to support the mission. He said he "understands and even agrees" with Washington, but stressed

that overt USG pressure could worsen an already delicate domestic political situation.

#### Parliament: D-66 Playing Tough

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15. (C) Embassy staff spoke with politicians from all major parties, including two members from holdout D-66, and the foreign policy spokesmen from PvdA, VVD, and CDA. CDA foreign policy spokesman Henk Jan Ormel was privately skeptical that the government would be able find enough votes in parliament for a majority, let alone the two-thirds "supermajority" CDA has called for. VVD foreign policy spokesman Hans Van Baalen, on the other hand, confidently counted "80-85" votes in favor of the mission, assuming the government "had the guts" to put the decision to parliament. Opposition PvdA foreign policy spokesman Bert Koenders continued to reserve judgment about PvdA's position, reiterating that his party would not address the issue until the government put its cards on the table. He noted, however, that opposition to the mission within the party is growing stronger with each day. All three readily acknowledged that the opposition of junior coalition partner D-66 has put the government in an awkward position by threatening to leave the coalition -- although van Baalen argued forcefully that this was most likely a bluff.

16. (C) D-66 Defense Spokesman Bert Bakker told Charge and DATT January 6 that D-66 had doubts a reconstruction mission could be conducted in Uruzgan given a perceived deteriorating security situation in Uruzgan. Moreover, D-66 has received a boost in the polls by taking a stand, Bakker said. He doubted D-66 would remain in the government if Balkenende opted to go forward with the mission. Charge and DATT pressed Bakker, stressing that the people who stand to lose the most by these politics are those living in Southern Afghanistan, and asked bluntly what might change D-66's position. Bakker said he is still thinking of possible conditions that could be met to sway D-66 in favor of the mission, but "none came to mind." In a separate meeting with POLCOUNS, foreign policy spokesman Lousewies van der Laan was even more adamant that D-66 would "bring down the government" if the mission goes forward, even with a parliamentary majority including PvdA.

#### Skeptical Allies Prefer Indirect Approach

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17. (C) Charge hosted a meeting January 6 attended by the UK Charge, the Australian and Canadian Ambassadors, and their defense attaches to review developments and coordinate strategy. While they did not discount the possibility of a positive outcome, our counterparts said that the decision was looking "particularly grim." They were reluctant to pursue an overt strategy to pressure the Dutch, and preferred discrete, bilateral approaches to avoid the impression of teaming up against the GONL. Both the Canadian and Australian ambassadors said they had instructions not to lobby the Dutch actively -- the Canadian Embassy is standing down until Canada's national elections on January 23, while Canberra feels it has other options in terms of potential ISAF partners should the Dutch decline.

18. (C) Charge challenged our counterparts to formulate a strategy to help the Dutch reach a positive decision. Following a prolonged conversation, our counterparts agreed that indirect influence through the media, or interventions by NATO officials and key foreign officials would be most helpful in swaying public opinion. The Australian ambassador noted that PM Downer will meet with PM Balkenende, FM Bot, and DM Kamp when he visits the Netherlands on January 30. While he doubted Downer would be willing to make a strong pitch to the GONL, Downer could deliver a message from Secretary Rice, who will be visiting Australia next week.

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All agreed that the upcoming London donor's conference would be an excellent opportunity for all parties to lobby the

Dutch and to help the Dutch put a more humanitarian spin on their efforts.

19. (C) Allied diplomats also stressed the importance of a more active NATO in the Dutch discussion, including the possible participation of NATO SYG de Hoop Scheffer in parliamentary hearings or op-eds from NATO officials in Dutch media. Our counterparts also noted that interventions from UN SYG Annan and Afghan President Karzai would be extremely influential, and questioned whether Annan and Karzai might be able to visit or at least make statements in the press during the London donor's conference. Charge noted that these were among several options being discussed in Washington.

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